

VACCINATION COVERAGE —STILL A LONG WAY TO GO

As we look forward to a new century, we can look back with satisfaction at the progress that has been made against vaccine-preventable diseases. Before the introduction of widespread immunization in the United States, infectious diseases killed or disabled thousands of children each year. Tens of thousands of cases of paralytic polio and nearly 400,000 measles cases were reported annually. Since then, immunization has reduced the level of most vaccine-preventable diseases by more than 99 percent.

The introduction of the polio vaccine into the childhood immunization program in 1955 led to the elimination of wild polio virus in the United States by 1979. In 1994, the Western Hemisphere was declared "polio-free." The measles vaccine, introduced in 1963, led to a 99 percent reduction in the incidence of measles. However, because many children did not get the vaccine or received only one dose, a measles epidemic struck between 1989 and 1991. This epidemic led to more than 55,000 cases of measles, 11,000 hospitalizations, and 120 deaths. After increased efforts to immunize against measles, the lowest number of confirmed measles cases ever recorded was achieved in 1997: a total of 138, down from almost 28,000 cases reported in 1990.

Although it is true that disease levels are low and immunization rates are high, much remains to be done to ensure the protection of our Nation's children into the next century. As the measles epidemic illustrated, we cannot become complacent. Other childhood illnesses that could be prevented by immunization are still with us. In 1997, only 26 percent of children ages 19 to 35 months had received the vaccine that can prevent chickenpox, and children continue to die each year from this disease. Cases of pertussis (whooping cough) have ranged from almost 3,000 to 7,500 during the 1990s. In July 1998, 68 cases of rubella (German measles) were confirmed in Texas—more than six times the number of cases reported during all of 1997. The new century is just around the corner, yet 900,000 2-year-olds are not fully protected against vaccine-preventable diseases.

National Infant Immunization Week (NIIW), April 16-22, is an annual observance that highlights the importance of timely immunization for children younger than age 2. This year's theme, "Immunization: Our Work Has Just Begun," emphasizes that our efforts must continue to ensure that the 11,000 babies born each day in the United States will have a complete series of vaccinations by age 2.

NIIW is a time to remind parents, caregivers, health care providers, and others of the need to immunize young children to give them a healthy start to life. During this national observance, numerous activities are being held in communities throughout the Nation to get the message across. Activities range from health fairs to poster contests to extended hours in clinics where children can get free vaccinations. The goal is to boost awareness of the importance of providing all children with full protection against vaccine-preventable disease. It is hoped that the result will be that today's children will be fully immunized for a healthy start in the 21st century.

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WEEK

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